



SILVER HEIGHTS

MANITBA
DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL
AFFAIRS AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES

Historic Resources Branch

**Honourable Eugene Kostyra
Minister**

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SILVER HEIGHTS

Today, most Winnipeggers associate the name Silver Heights with a residential district on the west side of their city. In the late nineteenth century, however, the name was synonymous with a large house and estate located near the Assiniboine River on the old Portage Trail. It began as the estate of the Rowands, a prominent fur trade family and was later purchased by Donald A. Smith, a railway entrepreneur and notable politician. Over its forty year existence, the house known as Silver Heights evolved from a charming log cottage frequented by fur traders and pioneers, into an elegant mansion which served as a centre of Red River political and social activity.

The early origins of the name Silver Heights are difficult to determine. "Heights" may well derive from the fact that the area is twelve metres higher than the forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. During the flood of 1852, settlers from the lower regions escaped to the higher ground to avoid the rising waters of the Red, and some relocated there.

Whether or not the heights actually shone silver is questionable. It is generally believed that the effect of the sun and wind on the natural vegetation may have been responsible for the name. One source suggests that this gentle knoll of prairie glowed "as with a silver rim" when the sun was reflected from the polished culms of buffalo grass. Pioneers noted that the leaves of the willow and poplar trees in the area shone silver as they fluttered in the wind. Although the natural vegetation of the region probably did not include an abundance of poplar or willow trees, three other native plants — the Silverleaf Psoralea, the Prairie Sage and the Wolf Willow or Silverberry — could have given the land a distinctly silver appearance.

The Rowand Home

On 11 March 1857 Hudson's Bay Company lots 1258, 1259 and 1260 on the Assiniboine River, near Sturgeon Creek, were transferred from a Mr. Kenneth Logan to John Rowand, Jr. Rowand probably chose the land because it was high enough to be safe from floods, and because it was located on the old Portage Trail. The land and the house he built on these lots came to be known as "Silver Heights."

John Rowand was born in 1812, the son of John Rowand, Sr., a wealthy Hudson's Bay Company trader and Louise Umfreville (also known as Lisette Humprville or Louise Humpherville), an Indian woman. John Jr. followed in his father's footsteps and entered the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). In 1848 he married Margaret Harriot, the daughter of Chief Factor Harriot, and by 1851 rose to the position of chief factor at Fort Pitt, in the Saskatchewan District of the HBC. Within five years, however, Rowand left the service of the company and went to settle in the Red River colony.

On 30 April 1857 Governor George Simpson of the HBC wrote to Rowand's brother Alexander and observed that John was "about getting a house built" on the land he had acquired from Kenneth Logan. Although



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

John Rowand, Junior

the lots were not officially transferred to Rowand until 1857, it is possible that he began to construct Silver Heights in 1856, as the dates in the HBC land register did not always correspond to the actual date of occupancy. Unfortunately, there are no records which pinpoint the exact date when the building was completed.

Like nearby St. James Anglican Church, the Rowand home was built

of oak logs which were probably floated down from Baie St. Paul. Once completed, the house began to draw flattering comments from many. In 1860 the Earl of Southesk described Silver Heights in some detail and noted that it was the "prettiest house" in the district.

Apparently, the cottage faced south towards the sun and overlooked the distant homesteads and wooded slopes. The main floor rested on "a low basement storey," and the shingled roof was "broken by numerous dormer windows." The house was surrounded on three sides by "a gaily painted verandah," and beyond the steps stretched a garden and an enclosed grass field dotted with transplanted trees. Southesk observed that the entire picture of home and grounds would not be easily equalled in British North America.

When John Rowand, Jr., died in the settlement in 1865, he bequeathed his estate to two of his sons. John James Alexander, son of John and Margaret Rowand, inherited lot 1258 with the dwelling and all other buildings, as well as the adjoining portion of lot 1259. Rowand's natural son, William, received lot 1260 and the remaining half of lot 1259.

John James died in 1866, and William was buried on 28 April 1871. After the death of his half-brother, six year old Edouard Robert Taché Rowand, John and Margaret's second son, was, or should have been the logical heir of Silver Heights. For some reason, however, Silver Heights was put up for public auction in August 1871 by the child's guardians, his uncle James McKay and Archbishop Taché.

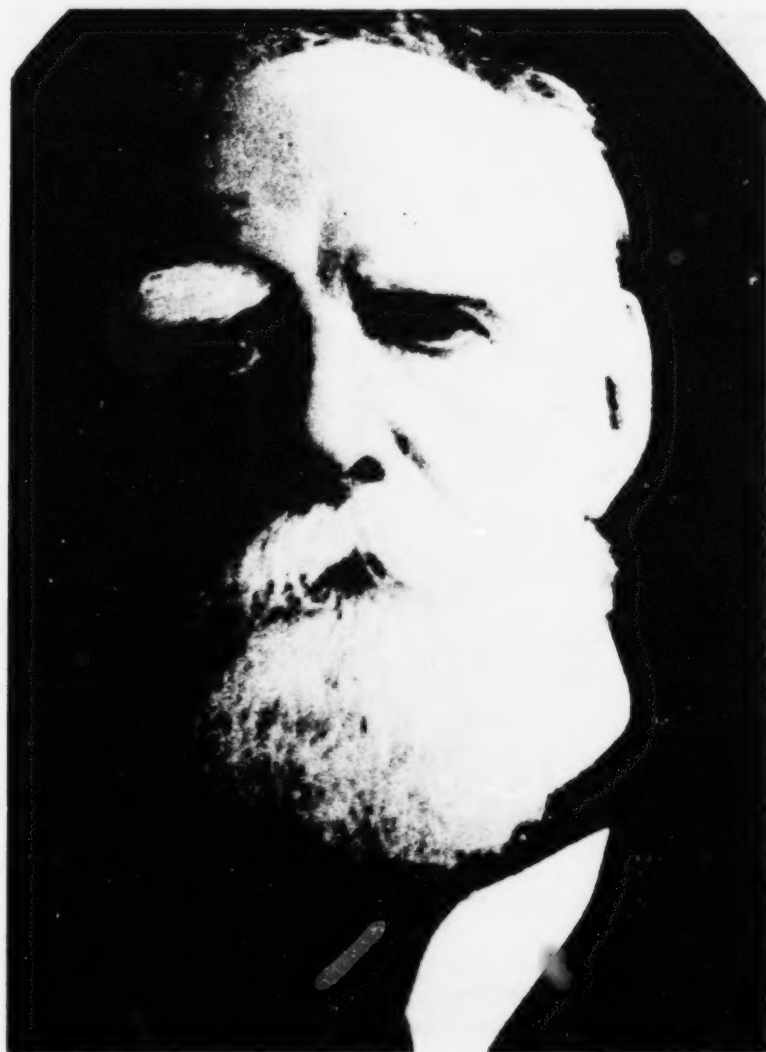
It is difficult to determine whether or not the members of the Rowand family were actually living at Silver Heights between the time of John Rowand's death in 1865 and the sale of the house in 1871. According to one account, plans were made to renovate the house in 1869. Apparently, Silver Heights was to be used as the residence of the governor being sent out by the Canadian government, until a "suitable mansion" could be erected. As Governor MacDougall was refused entrance into the settlement during the Red River resistance of 1870, he never actually resided at Silver Heights.

By the summer of 1871, however, the first Lieutenant-Governor of Manitoba, Adams G. Archibald was renting Silver Heights as his "country home." In fact, Archibald's private secretary, a Mr. Hill, committed suicide there on 4 or 5 July 1871. Nevertheless, the estate was sold in September 1871 to J.H. McTavish, the Hudson's Bay Company's chief officer at Upper Fort Garry and the husband of young Edouard Rowand's sister, Maria. On 28 October 1871, the same day the estate was officially transferred to McTavish, lot 1258 and half of lot 1259 were sold and transferred to Donald A. Smith. The Rowand home, Silver Heights, thus had a new owner.

The Donald A. Smith Mansion

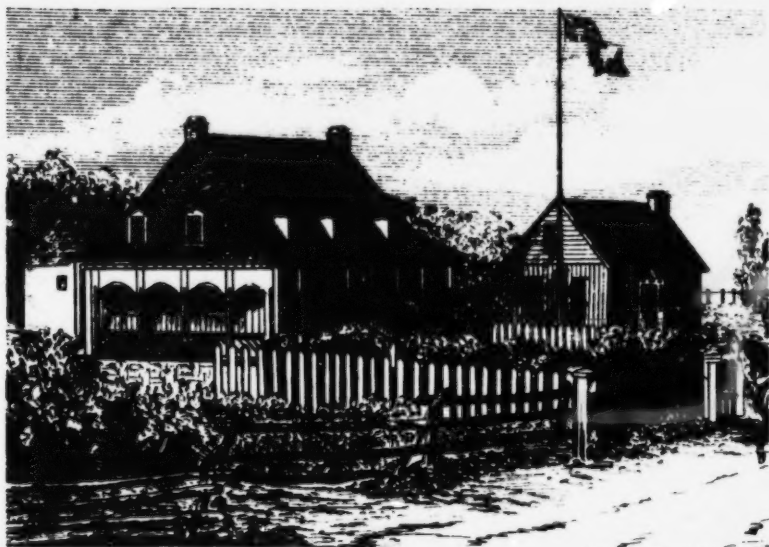
Donald A. Smith is probably better known as Lord Strathcona, the railway entrepreneur. Prior to his involvement with the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), Smith was a Hudson's Bay Company factor and chief commissioner. In 1869-70 he was sent to investigate the troubles in Red

River. After Manitoba entered Confederation in 1870, Smith was elected to represent Winnipeg in the new provincial legislature, and a year later he was sent to the Canadian Parliament as representative for the new constituency of Selkirk.



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Donald A. Smith, c. 1910



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Silver Heights, the residence of Lieutenant-Governor Archibald, c. 1871

A shrewd businessman, Smith later became involved in the CPR and rose to become one of the company's directors. Acting as a representative of the president of the CPR, he had the honour of driving the last spike on the transcontinental railway at Craigellachie on 7 November 1885. He was knighted the following year, and in 1897, while serving as the Canadian High Commissioner in Britain, he was raised to the peerage and given the title, Baron of Strathcona and Mount Royal.

Given the demands of his varied political and business careers, Smith spent a great deal of his time in London, Montreal and Ottawa, and Silver Heights was likely only one of his many residences. It is difficult to say how much time he actually spent at his home in Manitoba from 1871 until 1892, but he probably lived there for at least a part of each year between 1871 and 1874.

In the 1870s the new Dominion Government survey of Manitoba resulted in a re-assignment of Hudson's Bay Company lot numbers. Smith's estate, which included lots 1258 and 1259, became lot 18. Over the years Smith had the house on number eighteen renovated and refurbished. By 1881, Silver Heights certainly reflected the tastes and the social status of its prestigious owner.

According to a newspaper account in the *Winnipeg Daily Times*, 30 July 1881, which announced the impending arrival of Smith and his guest the Governor General of Canada, the Marquis of Lorne, the house was "a

princely mansion." The entranceway at the front led into a main hall richly furnished in "oak pieces." To the left stood the principal drawing room, furnished with Rosewood furniture and carpeted with a "rich Brussels carpet." The room was approximately five by eight metres and featured a walnut panelled fireplace. The "capacious" dining room to the right of the main hall was the same size as the drawing room and was furnished with an oak extension table capable of seating twenty-six people.

The "Vice Regal bedroom" was situated on the second floor in the southwest angle of the building and featured bird-eye maple furniture and luxurious carpeting. A boudoir off of this bedroom was furnished with a walnut suite. An additional ten to twelve bedrooms outfitted with rosewood and walnut furniture were also available for family and guests.

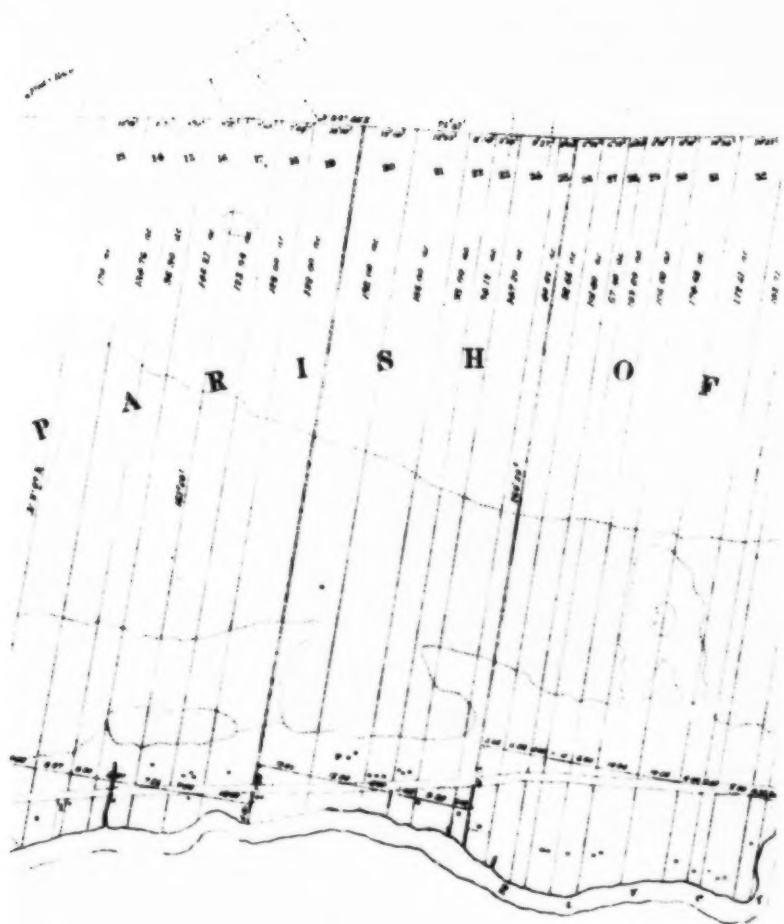
Apparently, the house boasted the most modern conveniences. Bathrooms and water-closets were attached to the premises and electric bells and speaking tubes were installed throughout the house for the convenience of visitors and family members. The mansion was also connected to the telephone exchange in Winnipeg. Finally, the kitchen offered "all the necessary appliances and utensils for the preparing of a good menu."

Silver Heights soon became a favourite stopping place or temporary residence for many distinguished personalities. On one occasion the house was actually expanded to accommodate two prestigious guests. Lady Dufferin noted in her diary that a reception room and two ante-rooms were added for the use of her husband and herself. Other visitors to Silver Heights included the Duke of Connaught, the Baroness Macdonald and Lord and Lady Aberdeen. The former Prime Minister of Canada, Alexander MacKenzie, was also a frequent guest.

Parties at the Smith mansion were apparently lavish affairs. Nellie McClung, who was later a well-known suffragette and political figure, lived next door to Silver Heights. In her book, *Clearing in the West*, she describes how she and her sister would watch from the bedroom window as beautifully dressed people arrived in covered carriages at the door of the Smith home. The two young girls would then weave romances around the guests who waltzed in the Silver Heights' ballroom to the strains of the Blue Danube Waltz.

Apart from his work and entertaining, Smith was also interested in horticulture and agriculture. Poplars of an unusual size grew on a lawn in front of his home and, on the west side of the house, flower and kitchen gardens were planted with an astonishing variety of vegetables and flowers. Smith is also said to have experimented in growing fruit trees and bushes, as well as wild plums, cherries, red and black currants and strawberries. Apparently, the gardener grew these fruits with the aid of glass and other devices.

The rest of the 321 hectare estate (Smith eventually gained possession of lots 17 and 19) also included a small farm. Some 202 hectares of grazing land supported thoroughbred horses, Highlanders and Hereford



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Section of a map of St. James parish, c. 1874, showing the Silver Heights estate on lot 18.

cattle, sheep and poultry. Smith also had over ninety-seven hectares where he grew red fye wheat, oats, barley, Dunmore wheat, flax, peas and potatoes.

One of the more unusual features of Silver Heights was the "little buffalo zoo." At some time between 1868 and 1879 James McKay, John

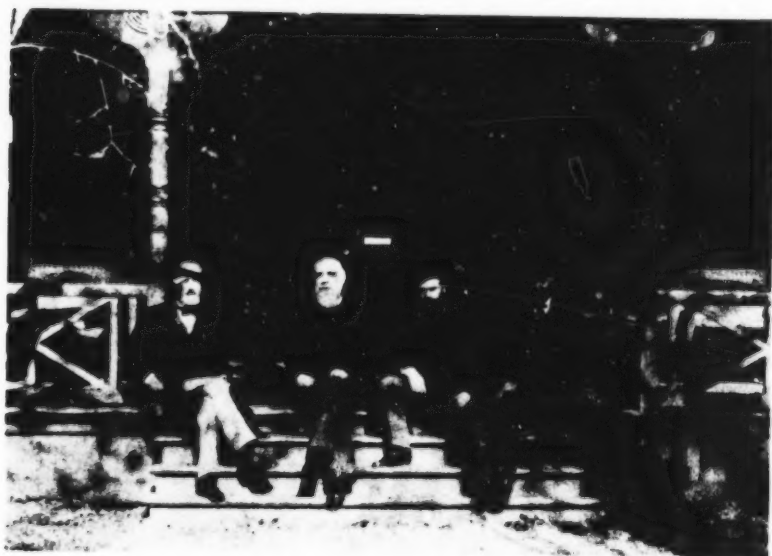
Rowand's brother-in-law and the owner of nearby Deer Lodge, sent some men out onto the Saskatchewan prairies to capture a few buffalo calves. After McKay died and Deer Lodge was sold, Donald Smith bought some of the buffalo and kept them at Silver Heights. This herd is said to have been established in 1889 but was later dispersed. Some of the animals were bought by Colonel Bedson and sent to the Stony Mountain Ranges. In 1898 Lord Strathcona placed his herd at the disposal of the federal government. Some of the buffalo were shipped west to Wainwright, Alberta, to Banff National Park, and after the turn of the century, to Assiniboine Park in Winnipeg.



Courtesy Notman Photographic Archives

A view of the grounds of Donald Smith's residence, Silver Heights, c. 1884

Perhaps the most unusual feature of the Smith estate was the personal rail line that ran from Winnipeg to the house. The reasons given for its construction vary. One account claims that an embittered Smith had the line built so that he could avoid going into Winnipeg after he lost the federal by-election of 1880. Another source maintains that the spur line was constructed for the convenience of Smith and his guests who used it when the St. James road was muddy and difficult to travel on. The most plausible explanation, however, is that the spur line was built for Smith by Cornelius Van Horne as a surprise and as "a chivalrous personal compliment."



Courtesy The Minnesota Historical Society.
Elizabeth Taylor and James Taylor Dunn Papers

Relaxing on the porch of Silver Heights

Van Horne was the manager of the CPR and was known for his love of elaborate practical jokes. At the time the spur line was built, Smith had ceased to occupy Silver Heights since his business compelled him to divide his time between Montreal and London. To celebrate the road's completion, Van Horne organized a surprise party for Smith that was held at Silver Heights. Cooks and domestics were hastily engaged, furniture was hired and a banquet was served up for the guests.

On 24 November 1892 Silver Heights was completely destroyed by a fire that probably originated in the hall stove. The manager of the farm was out visiting and the two female domestics did their best to try and

save what they could. Unfortunately, the dry wooden house burned quickly, and the fire department arrived on the scene too late. Only a few chairs, a sofa and some of the dining room furniture were saved.

For some years after the fire, the fields at Silver Heights were cultivated, and local residents began to refer to the estate as "the farm." One source claims that many acres of the farm were planted with potatoes in the years of the First World War. Apparently, dozens of women could be seen in the fields during this period "hoeing, weeding or picking off potato bugs."

When Lord Strathcona died in 1914, he left 175 acres of Silver Heights to the City of Winnipeg, and this later became part of the Winnipeg International Airport. His daughter inherited the rest of the estate, as well as her father's title.

Ultimately, the lands were transferred to the municipality of St. James and were then developed into the residential district of Silver Heights. The street names in the area are reminiscent of the Rowand family, Lord Strathcona and the fur trade. The suburb of Silver Heights thus stands as a tribute to the pioneers and to an early Manitoba landmark.

Suggestions for Further Reading

For information on the name and origins of Silver Heights the reader may want to consult, *Place Names in Manitoba*, published by the Geographic Board of Canada (Ottawa: J.O. Patenaude and Co., 1933) and a variety of newspaper articles available in the *Manitoba History Scrapbooks* at the Legislative Library of Manitoba.

Information on the family of John Rowand, Senior can be found in J.G. MacGregor's book, *John Rowand: The Czar of the Prairies* (Saskatoon: Western Prairie Producer Books, 1978). Wilson Beckles', *Lord Strathcona: The Story of His Life* (London: Methuen and Co., 1902) chronicles the life of Donald A. Smith.

The *James McKay* pamphlet, another in the series published by the Historic Resources Branch, Department of Cultural Affairs and Historical Resources, Province of Manitoba compliments the information provided here.

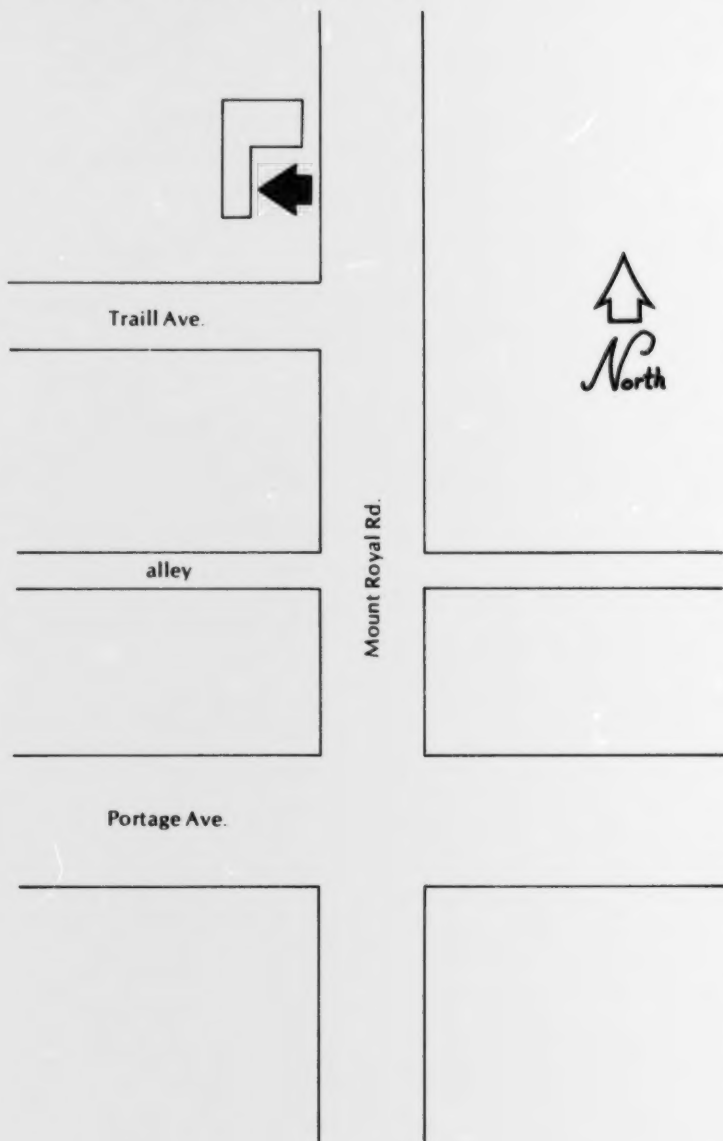
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The cover photograph is printed courtesy of the Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum of McGill University, Montreal, Canada.

Thanks to the Provincial Archives of Manitoba and the Hudson's Bay Company for the use of their collections. Special thanks is also due to Mr. E.J. Rowand, a resident of Winnipeg and a direct descendant of John Rowand, for the valuable information he was able to supply.



The plaque erected by the Historic Sites Advisory Board of Manitoba to commemorate Silver Heights is located north of Portage Ave., on the corner of Mount Royal Rd. and Traill Ave.



OUR HERITAGE

We have received great gifts as our heritage in Canada — beautiful rivers and parks, rolling hills, trees and grassland; the rich resources of nature are ours to protect, cherish and enjoy.

Wherever man has been, there are marks of defilement and destruction — let us resolve that this shall not be our legacy to the twenty-first century. Let us rather honour and emulate those who went before us as pioneers, who gave of themselves, building and creating, enriching the land. They have earned our thanks, and while we cannot repay them, we can respect their achievements and resolve that we will try to follow them in action and in attitude.

For this we set aside this special place in our Province, a site that is part of history.

POOR

QUALITY

ORIGINAL